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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 002322

SIPDIS

FOR DS/OP/AF AND DS/DSS/ITA

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: OBASANJO FACES VIOLENT PROTEST IN KANO

CLASSIFIED BY A/DCM BRIAN L. BROWNE. REASON 1.5 (B) and (D).

¶1. (C) Summary: Instead of being a vehicle to improve his image in Northern public opinion, President Obasanjo's visit to Kano has been mired in controversy over the police response to anti-Obasanjo protests in that city. Over 35 people were arrested when their demonstration turned violent July 29. There are conflicting accounts about fatalities. Media reports indicate seven people may have been killed by police bullets; but these reports are unconfirmed and the GON denies any killings. There were credible reports of people wounded but the cause(s) of their injuries remain uncertain. In any event, the protest both illustrate and further reinforce Obasanjo's negative image in Kano and much of the North. End Summary.

¶2. (U) President Olusegun Obasanjo attended the launch of the biography of the Emir of Kano, Alhaji Ado Bayero, at the Emir's Palace July 29 as part of an official visit to Kano. According to media reports, police fired after protesters became more agitated and started to draw near when Obasanjo's entourage left the venue. The protesters were shouting pro-Buhari and pro-Mohammed Abacha slogans as well as carrying placards of both men. (Note: Buhari is a presidential hopeful whose popularity in Kano is significant and whose criticism of Obasanjo has been stinging. Abacha, the son of late Head of State Sani Abacha, remains jailed despite the Supreme Court decision freeing him of charges in the murder of Kudirat Abiola, wife of the annulled 1993 election's putative victor Moshood Abiola. Quashing the murder charges was part of a deal whereby Abacha would be freed in exchange for the recovery of over one billion dollars government funds stolen by the Abacha family. Since the funds have not yet been transferred to its account, the GON has delayed Abacha's release. End Note.)

¶3. (U) Several press reports claim that, as a result of the police shootings and tear gas, 7 people were killed and others wounded.

¶4. (U) The Presidency promptly issued a July 30 statement denying any fatalities. The press release stated "it is true that a small group of people had displayed placards demanding the release of Mohammed Abacha at the Emir's palace, venue of the launching of the book." The Presidency contended the "police acted promptly to check the disruptive intention of the protesters and dispersed them with tear-gas and time-tested crowd-control measures." The release criticized local and foreign media organizations like BBC and VOA for reporting the alleged shooting deaths.

¶5. (U) Alhaji Aminu Kwaru, the Private Secretary to the Emir of Kano, told our Political FSN that tear gas was fired but there were no fatalities and he did not believe any shots were fired. He blamed the incident on politicians exploiting the emotions of unemployed and disgruntled youth. Although there was no evidence of fatalities, Kwaru would not discount the possibility that some had been injured.

¶6. (U) However, other Embassy sources claimed shots were fired but they could not confirm if the shots were aimed at the protesters or in the air. A BBC reporter saw several injured demonstrators but no evidence of any fatalities. The Kano State Police Commissioner also denied any shooting deaths. He did state that 37 protesters had been arrested for causing a public disturbance.

COMMENT

¶7. (C) Considering the controversy overhanging Mohammed Abacha's continued detention and that Buhari would also be at

the Emir's palace, Obasanjo was walking into unfriendly territory when he entered Kano. Obasanjo also should have expected a rough welcome given the treatment meted to V.P. Atiku in Kano a few months ago. (Atiku was the target of rock throwing at a book launching in May.) Given these factors, the timing of the visit seemed ill advised. It suggests an underestimation within the Presidency of the depth of the opposition in Kano as well as an underestimation of the extent to which Obasanjo's opponents will go to make him look bad should he walk on their home turf.

18. (C) The Kano incident has generated negative media for Obasanjo at a time when he does not need any more bad news. Many people will make up their minds on what happened in Kano based on their feelings about Obasanjo. Thus, despite the lack of concrete evidence, many Obasanjo critics will believe the killings took place because they want to think the worst about Obasanjo and his government. On another level, this event is another signal that the election campaign will be tumultuous and occasioned by episodes of violence.

JETER